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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: REGIONAL PRESIDENT WEIGHS FIRING TOP SECURITY ADVISORS OVER
AGGRESSIVE POLICE DURING STUDENT PROTESTS

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1. (SBU) Summary: Scores were injured - many of them police and journalists - March 18 after the Mossos d'Esquadra (Catalan regional police) broke up a student protest at the University of Barcelona. An investigation is underway to determine how and why the incident turned violent. The students were protesting implementation of a European-wide higher education system also known as the "Bologna Plan". Counselor for the Interior (Minister-equivalent) Joan Saura and Mossos Director Rafael Olmos declared officers generally followed the correct procedures, but some mistakes were made. Both Saura and Olmos, could lose their jobs over the incidents, which one university professor labeled, "Franco Era" tactics. Opposition party leaders blamed Saura, a Green Party member, for not leading the police properly. Rank and file officers within the force blamed him for sending them mixed signals of support. This is not the first time the Mossos have been accused of over aggressive behavior, and they will have little time to recover as students expect to continue their protests in the coming days. End Summary.

Protest Breaking Up

2. (SBU) At least 60 people, including police and journalists, were injured March 18 when Catalonia's regional police, Mossos d'Esquadra, entered the University of Barcelona campus to remove more than 50 student protestors. The students had been holed up on campus for months protesting the Spanish government's plan to implement a European-wide higher education system, the so-called "Bologna Plan". The students were being removed because they had reportedly violated an agreement made with the University's director that they would not block other students from returning to class.

3. (SBU) The removal of the protestors began smoothly, however, the situation turned later turned violent when the protestors returned with a so-called "radical minority" of more aggressive students. According to reports, the police "disproportionately" responded; hitting students with clubs in an effort to disperse the increasingly agitated crowd. Several journalists were also injured during the violent outbreak. According to witnesses, several students were seen throwing bottles and chairs at police, "to defend themselves". Counselor for the Interior

(Minister-equivalent) and Green Party member, Joan Saura, told reporters there were 56 injuries, 32 of which were suffered by police. The director of the Mossos, Rafael Olmos, accepted full responsibility for what had happened. He noted that changes would be made to police protocol to ensure that this kind of thing would not happen again. Despite assurances several months ago by Saura that Mossos officers would be required to display identification numbers, none did, making it difficult to identify individual officers who had behaved inappropriately.

Answer Demanded

14. (SBU) Opposition party and police labor union officials called on regional president Jose Montilla to either fire Saura or, at least take responsibility for security issues away from him. Police labor union officials also complained that Saura did not adequately defend its rank and file members in his statements to the press. So far, Montilla is standing by his man. In a statement he said he would have preferred that the removal of the students not turn out the way it had. He did agree, however, to pursue and investigation into the matter. One University of Barcelona professor said that the actions taken by the Mossos reminded him of Franco era police actions.

15. (SBU) Comment: Allegations of heavy-handedness, or worse, abuse, by the police is not new in Catalonia. Last summer, the Mossos were forced to put security cameras in one of its most heavily trafficked police stations, and police were still caught abusing suspected criminals prompting charges and suspensions. It is clear authorities are finding it hard to walk the line between an appropriate response and being overly aggressive. As

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a result, protestors have gone out of their way to provoke violence. Still, even as students called for another round of protests, there are signs that unity within their ranks is cracking. A group wanting to attend classes confronted the more radical protestors calling for them to allow access to the university. This could offer city and police authorities the cover they need to end the standoff peacefully. Meanwhile, opposition party leaders, who have never been happy with Saura at the helm, continue to put the pressure on Montilla to fire him. Saura is rumored to have agreed to sacrifice Olmos, instead. There is little doubt that greater scrutiny of police procedures will result no matter what action Montilla takes.
End Comment.
ROBINSON